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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000165

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/9/2032

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SUBJECT: CORRECTED COPY: VATICAN-AFFILIATED INSTITUTE HAILS LETTER  
FROM MUSLIM SCHOLARS

REF: VATICAN 00151

VATICAN 00000165 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher J. Sandrolini, Charge, Embassy  
Vatican.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

CORRECTED COPY: ADDED ADDRESSEE

11. (C) Summary: The president of the Vatican-affiliated Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies has hailed "A Common Word", the letter that 138 Muslim scholars have recently addressed to the Pope and other prominent Christian leaders inviting them to a theological dialogue, as an unprecedented and extremely important document for Muslim-Christian relations. The institute has issued a press release welcoming the letter. The Vatican's senior official on inter-religious dialogue, Cardinal Tauran, has stated that the Holy See will respond to the letter. (Note: See last paragraph for suggested Department action. End note.) End summary.

12. (C) DCM and Poloff met on October 24 with the President of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI), Miguel Angel Ayuso Guixot, to seek his views on "A Common Word" (reftel) and its potential to counterbalance religious extremism. Ayuso said the letter was a strong sign of good will on the part of the senders, but more importantly had the potential to serve as a guiding document for all Muslims. Because it was signed by a large and diverse group of scholars that had reached "a consensus" on the issue, Muslims could legitimately consider the document a religiously authoritative source. The letter, he added, is a useful diplomatic tool to foster dialogue and a document that should appeal to faith communities because it addresses transcendental issues. Ayuso noted that voices of Islamic extremists have been louder than that of moderates, and that documents like "A Common Word" help to reverse this trend.

13. (C) Throughout history, Ayuso said, "there have been debates and polemics between Christians and Muslims, with each side trying to convince the other about the rightfulness of its own views. We don't need more polemics. This letter is different." Ayuso noted that the signatories of the letter did not claim to officially represent specific communities, and thought this was in fact an advantage that had allowed the initiative to progress. He did not expect any Muslim scholars or religious leaders to oppose the document.

14. (C) Ayuso said that the letter came as a surprise for the Vatican, which only learned about it the day before its release. He was certain that the Holy See would respond to it, and that Cardinal Bertone, the Holy See's Secretary of State (i.e.,

foreign minister), would be personally involved. Ayuso noted that while the letter was addressed to the Pope as well as to the heads of the world's largest Christian churches and denominations, the Vatican would speak only for the Catholic Church in its response. It would be too difficult, he added, to coordinate a response among all the addressees, some of whom --such as the Archbishop of Canterbury-- had already praised the document publicly. Ayuso was pleased that the letter's primary addressee was the Pope. (Note: The list of addressees starts with the Pope, whose name stands by itself, followed by the names and titles of other addressees in a separate paragraph. End note.)

15. (U) The President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, stated in an interview to Vatican Radio on October 23 that the Vatican will "certainly" respond to the letter, which in his opinion evidenced a willingness to collaborate on peace through religion.

16. (U) PISAI issued a long press release October 25 welcoming "A Common Word", and praising the non-polemical character of the document. The PISAI response says of "A Common Word" that it is a "highly significant event that we cannot fail to notice and must accentuate its importance." PISAI expresses appreciation for the broad scope of the text, wide range of signatories and addresses, and perspective of the drafters not as members writing on behalf of the umma, but rather as partners with humanity. PISAI is also impressed by the bold call for love of God and humanity and willingness to use inclusive language drawn from the Bible. At the same time, PISAI commends the willingness of the drafters to "challenge us" while not losing sight of the genuine problem of religious freedom. Most striking, PISAI comments on the presence in "A Common Word" of a "a new and creative attitude to the Koranic text and that of the Prophetic tradition" -- making use of historic interpretations.

17. (C) Comment: Ayuso and his colleagues at PISAI are experts on Islam and Christian-Islamic relations. His views on the possible impact of the letter underscore its potential medium and long term impact, rather than its immediate application to any specific situation. Other Vatican officials with whom we have spoken see the letter as a vindication of the Pope's "prophetic" Regensburg address, without which --they maintain-- moderate

VATICAN 00000165 002.2 OF 002

Muslim scholars might not have reached out in pursuit of dialogue and to reject violence. Ayuso, on the other hand, traced this initiative to September 11, 2001 and its aftermath.

18. (C) Embassy Vatican again draws to the attention of the Department and other embassies the groundbreaking and dramatic nature of "A Common Word". Like the Church, Western governments have often spoken of the difficulty of dealing with Islam because it lacks a centralized structure of authority and because Muslims have little tradition of exegesis. At a stroke, "A Common Word" has addressed both of these concerns: it is a bold attempt to create a community consensus which has great potential significance to influence Muslims everywhere over time; and it opens the door in a surprising way to the possibility of interpreting holy scripture.

19. (C) We urge the Department to welcome publicly the issuance of "A Common Word" and to see it as a building block for efforts against religious extremism.

ROONEY